

Flaming Shoe Polish Everywhere

By AMH1 Timothy Oakes,
VR-55

(Ghost-written for someone who wants to remain anonymous, and, yes, this incident really happened)

There I was, sitting in the shop, hypnotized by a beam of morning sunlight coming through the porthole—I mean window. I was daydreaming when the supervisor surprised me by arriving a little early.

I hurriedly swept my feet off his desk and removed my butt from his chair. Simultaneously, I dropped his copy of the safety newsletter and put back his sunglasses. He took his seat and pulled a can of shoe polish from a desk drawer. “Ah, damn,” he said. “Someone has broken the tab off the can.”

Seeing this as an opportunity to improve my standing with the boss, I jumped up and ran over to help. He was pulling out another can, one that had a tab, so I knew I had to hurry. Otherwise, he would use the second can, and my chance to impress him would be wasted. My “beer bottle cap on the corner of the desktop” trick worked, and he soon was polishing his shoes like someone fresh out of boot camp.

When the supervisor went to his morning meeting, I saw both cans nearly were empty and decided to combine the polish into one can. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and I certainly didn’t think anyone would get hurt or furniture would be damaged.

I pulled out my lighter and moved one can so that half of it was hanging off the desktop. I then warmed the bottom of the can, and the polish quickly turned to a warm, shiny liquid. All I had to do now was pour this liquid into the other can. It was quiet when I started pouring, except for the faint howl of a dog in the distance. Then, “Poof!” flames rose from the container, temporarily igniting my nose hairs.

While I frantically blew outward, trying to purge the noxious fumes from my sinus, the flames tossed small globules of hot, liquid shoe polish about the supervisor’s desk. Then I made a mistake—OK, a really big mistake. I blew on the flames!

I heard the sound of an inferno and, at first, felt a cool splatter of liquid on my face. There I was, standing over my supervisor’s desk, with small particles of flaming shoe polish everywhere. It covered the typewriter, the floor, and my face.

I yelled and turned to my shipmates (several had gathered) for help, but they were laughing, with seemingly no regard for the dots of fire on my face. I grabbed a nearby rag and tried to snuff out the flames. Unfortunately, the rag ignited, so I tossed it to the ground.

A group of AMEs came running, and a PO1 asked, “Hey, do you want me to get a fire extinguisher?”

I replied, “Yeah!” But, he, too, soon was immobilized with laughter. I stomped around the pavement, trying frantically to kill the offending flames I had brought to life. They fought back and tried to start anew on the bottom of my boondockers, but I ultimately was victorious.

I then surveyed the scene and found hundreds—no, thousands—of tiny, black dots covering everything out to a distance of 4 feet. I grabbed a scrub brush and tried to remove all the evidence of what had happened.

When the supervisor returned, he gave the passdown without knowing—I thought—anything about the events. I had some doubts later that day, though, when he asked, “Hey, didn’t you have eyebrows this morning?” ❌



Illustration by DM1(AW) Eulogio Devera